

"Julie Belaga's impressive range of public and private sector experience, particularly in the area of the environment, will be a valuable addition to the Export-Import Bank Board," said the President.

NOTE: A biography of the nominee was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary.

Remarks on the American Helicopter Tragedy in Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters

April 14, 1994

The President. On behalf of the American people, I want to begin by expressing my deep sorrow at the tragedy this morning in Iraq and to extend my personal condolences to the families and the loved ones of all those who lost their lives.

Three years ago, our Armed Forces joined in a multinational mission to provide humanitarian relief to the oppressed Kurdish minority civilians in northern Iraq. Those who died today were a part of that mission of mercy. They served with courage and professionalism, and they lost their lives while trying to save the lives of others. The important work they were doing must, and will, continue.

According to initial reports, two American helicopters were mistakenly identified as Iraqi helicopters and shot down by United States aircraft. I have met with Secretary Perry this morning. I have talked with him and with General Shalikashvili, and I have instructed him to lead a full inquiry into the circumstances of this terrible incident. We will get the facts. And when we get the facts, we will make them available to the American people and to the people of Britain, France, and Turkey, our partners in Operation Provide Comfort.

Later today, Secretary Perry and General Shalikashvili will be providing further briefings to you as we know more and more facts. The facts are still coming in, and we will give them to you just as soon as we have verified exactly what occurred.

At this moment, let me close by saying that we should join together in terrible sorrow and also in honoring the high purpose for which these individuals served and in which they lost their lives. The Nation and the world should remember them in gratitude.

Thank you.

Helicopter Tragedy

Q. Mr. President, what's your preliminary assessment, though? What are you being told of how this could have happened? And is there any suggestion that the troops there are on too fine of a hair trigger?

The President. Well, all that will have to be, obviously, evaluated in light of the real facts here. There are at least three points of inquiry involving, first, the actions of the American jets; second, the AWACS and their actions; and third, the actions of the helicopters themselves. And again, I will tell you we will give you as much information as we can. I just am very reluctant to say anything until we're absolutely sure. I want you to have good information, and we will be doing continuous briefings and updates all day long as we know more.

Q. Do you know anything, Mr. President, about the numbers of people that might be involved and whether they were all American?

The President. We know that there were probably more than 20 people involved and that they were not all American. We do not believe they were all American. We believe there were some other people on the helicopters.

Q. And just to follow, you seem to be indicating—

The President. We do not have—let me say, as of the moment I walked out here, we do not have an absolute roster of the people on the helicopters. I would tell you if I knew. But we think there were approximately 12 total crewmembers, and we know there were some other people on the helicopters. And we know there were some other member countries in the operations. We do not know any more than that. When we know who was on there, we will tell you. As you know, we've dispatched an American team to the site to get all the facts.

Q. Do you know, sir, how high up the chain of command the decision had to be made to go ahead and take these helicopters out, what the process was, and whether it was followed?

The President. I have been briefed on that, but I believe, to make absolutely sure that no error is made in answering that question, that is a question you should direct to Secretary Perry and General Shalikashvili, because they will be briefing shortly.

Bosnia

Q. Mr. President, in the wake of the decision by the U.N. and NATO to bomb in Bosnia, you're now confronted with a developing hostage crisis, it appears, there where French troops are the latest to be encircled by Serbs. What is your message to the Bosnian Serbs as this appears to be moving toward crisis proportions?

The President. Well, of course, this was a concern in the beginning of all our allies who had troops on the ground there. But I would remind the Serbs that we have taken no action, none, through NATO and with the support of the U.N. to try to win a military victory for their adversaries. What we have done is taken military action in Bosnia through NATO, with the approval of the United Nations, to get them to honor the U.N. rules and to encourage them to do what they say they wish to do, which is to engage in negotiations.

There was a hopeful report in this morning's press about the ongoing efforts of the Russians through Mr. Churkin to get the Serbs to stop the aggression and to return to the negotiations. We are in touch with all the events in Bosnia today; there are lots of things going on there. I think the Serbs would be making a mistake to start treating the United Nations and NATO forces as adverse combatants. That is not what we are doing; we are trying to get them to honor their word. And they would be making a mistake to do that.

Q. Sir, if I could follow, how would you get them to make the distinction that you're making? They don't seem to be picking up on that.

The President. I think they know quite well what went on. I think they're just trying to leverage their position.

Singapore Caning of Michael Fay

Q. Mr. President, Singapore seems intent on caning this American teenager who was convicted of vandalism. Do you think American companies that operate in Singapore should exercise their economic clout to try and stop this? And also, former President Bush is in Singapore today. Should he—would you like to see him intercede on behalf of the young man?

The President. I've not thought through your first question; I don't know the answer to that. We have generally quite good relations with Singapore. They have a different culture, a different view, a different set of laws.

As you know, I have not objected to the young man's being punished. I have not even objected to the young man's being incarcerated. I have objected to this caning. I think many Americans who have expressed sympathy with it do not understand exactly what it involves, how it is going to be administered, and that he is going to bleed considerably and may have permanent scars. And I think it is a mistake.

President Bush will have to decide for himself what he wishes to say, but I would—if he decides to say something supportive of the absence of caning, I would certainly be grateful for that. But that—it will be a decision for him to decide what he wants to say.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:15 a.m. in the Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vitaly Churkin, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister. The proclamation on the death of those aboard American helicopters in Iraq is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.